

BACK TO BUSINESS IOWA PODCAST

A partnership of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and America's SBDC Iowa

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 19: Shop Where I Live

(21:04; published May 22, 2020)

Description: *This episode features Cherie Edilson, co-founder and CEO of Shop Where I Live. Cherie and host Steve Adams discuss this web-based sales platform for Main Street businesses in collaboration with chambers of commerce and economic development organizations.*

Transcript:

[music]

Steve Adams, host 00:10

Hello, and welcome to the Back to Business Iowa podcast from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and the programs including Community and Economic Development, Farm, Food and Enterprise Development, and the Iowa Small Business Development Centers. These podcasts cover relevant topics for businesses and individuals related to education, research and technical assistance during and post COVID-19.

Steve Adams, host 00:55

Hello and welcome to the back to business Iowa podcast. I'm Steve Adams, field specialist III at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Community and Economic Development, and your host for these podcasts. On this podcast, we'll be discussing the web portal Shop Where I Live. And our guest today is Cherie Edilson, co-founder and CEO. Thank you for being here today, Cherie.

Cherie Edilson 01:20

Thank you for having me.

Steve Adams, host 01:22

Yeah, I've been reviewing your website and the platform makes a lot of sense for businesses to aggregate their resources for local purchasing. Can you tell me what Shop Where I Live is, and how you developed it, please?

Cherie Edilson 01:36

Yeah, so Shop Where I Live is, we create ecommerce, marketplace websites for local communities to help businesses sell together online and then make it easy for the community to shop local online. So it's really easy to shop from some of the big box stores or shop Amazon, the large marketplaces online. But it's not really easy to shop from local small businesses. And so we're trying to bring communities together. Our tagline is "where Main Street meets the internet." And that's really just kind of how I want people to think about it, where you can go to one website and shop from local businesses only through there, and be able to check out from multiple businesses at the same time and buy local online.

Cherie Edilson 02:15

We got started a few years back in 2017. So I actually was a small business owner myself, my husband was a web developer, so we're both small business owners. And he also worked full time for a software company and I made craft products that I mostly sold at farmer's markets. And then I also sold online



through my website and through Amazon. And I had done one local little craft fair, like a Christmas craft fair. And it snowed the night before and nobody came. It was really disappointing. When you're a market vendor, you prepare a lot ahead of time you make crafts for weeks, or if you're some of the artisans that are doing homemade goods, they might stay up for a few days straight in a row and are baking. And then if you go to a craft fair or farmers market and there's no one that comes, it's just all of your sales and everything that you've put into that day is gone.

Cherie Edilson 03:05

And so I looked around the room at that craft fair and I knew all the other vendors were disappointed and I knew most of them were not selling online. I had been doing online for a few years, I'd been selling on Amazon. So I had a good influx from there, I had my own website, had other ways that were coming in. But I knew, you know, these vendors were disappointed. So I called my husband and I said, get the kids dressed. We're going to shop from all these vendors. And we went around to all of their individual tables. And we thought, these people are amazing, and their crafts are amazing. You wouldn't know that they existed unless you came to this little three-hour craft fair, on a Sunday morning, where it had snowed.

Cherie Edilson 03:38

And so we left there thinking that there's gotta be a way to help these people. So we took his web development skills with then my small business skills, and we tried to combine it into one and built Cedar Rapids Marketplace originally, just to see if we could make a marketplace for crafters to sell online. And then we had businesses that would apply that were service-based businesses and we thought well, these people also need help, like can we help these guys? And then we started to have some brick and mortars apply, and so we thought, really, why can't you just shop local online? And so we went through the Iowa Startup Accelerator in 2018 and came out as Shop Where I Live, to be able to go to more communities and work with all types of businesses in those communities,

Steve Adams, host 04:17

Businesses having to pivot a little bit with their business model, you took that challenge of a unexpected snowstorm to turn it into an opportunity, not only for yourself, but for other people. So as a follow up, how does that portal work? And could you give give us an idea of who some of your clients are?

Cherie Edilson 04:35

We have multiple websites. So we have websites for individual communities. So rather than being like one large Etsy website, where you just come and shop products, ours are specifically built for certain communities. So we have like a Cedar Rapids Shop Where I Live site. We have a Central Iowa site that's partnered with five—six chambers in central Iowa, chambers of commerce, and so you can shop from multiple businesses in that central Iowa region. So we won't come to a new community unless we have a partnership with a local chamber of commerce or an economic development group or a Main Street just because we really need their partnership and their access to the businesses they're already supporting to be able to provide, you know, service to them.

Cherie Edilson 05:18

So, as a customer, you can come and browse from businesses on the website, you can search through the search form to look for something specifically, you can search through categories, and if you find things that you like, it's just like Amazon, you can add them to your cart, you can check out from multiple vendors at the same time. And then in your checkout, you might see one vendor has local pickup, one vendor may have local pickups, shipping or delivery, and you could choose your options depending on the rates there. And then you get a you get an order notice that each vendor then has

their individual orders that they fulfill, depending on however the customer selected it, and it's an online local marketplace.

Cherie Edilson 05:54

Our clients are the chambers of commerce or the economic development groups, really, for Main Streets. They're already supporting businesses in one way or another. So if you think about a chamber of commerce, they're doing, they have this online directory, which is helpful in some regards. You can look and see who all their members are, you can click off from the directory and maybe go to a website or view their social media page. But what our marketplace does, it's really just, at the very least, it's a better, enhanced member directory. Because you can now see images from that business, they can now break out all of their services or products in their individual pages. And you can actually then shop those products on our website.

Cherie Edilson 06:34

Some businesses, maybe already have an e-commerce website. And so they could still list their products to our marketplace. But instead of having a customer checkout on our marketplace, it can take them to that product or service on their marketplace, and they can complete checkout through there. And it just is a way to support their member businesses in this digital revolution, really. That's kind of where the world is going. I think every year, more and more sales go towards online e-commerce, I think it's supposed to be ... they estimate it is gonna be 22% by 2023 of retail sales are going to be online. And we saw just in the last couple months that you know, online was really the only way you could do sales or over the phone. And so we're trying to help people move into that digital world, into it with other businesses in their community with support of a chamber of commerce or Main Street group or some of the people that are already there working with them in the area.

Steve Adams, host 07:27

Well, it gives the chamber something else to offer to its membership, too. And I know a decade or so ago that a lot of communities were using their shop local programs to put vendors online. And I don't think anybody was really very successful with that effort. It sounds like you've got a more streamlined, up to date, more of a hands-on approach to this. Would you agree?

Cherie Edilson 07:49

Yeah, I agree. There's a lot of directories, you know, like there's a lot of directories, almost everybody has a directory, but there's very few online marketplaces because it does, it takes a lot to support small businesses online. And especially, I mean, sometimes we're not only teaching businesses e-commerce, but we're also sometimes teaching them how to use their computers. We're also teaching them just—I was teaching, we're working with a 79 year old up in New York right now, who is getting her handmade products on one of our New York Marketplace. And I was teaching her how to add a folder to her desktop to drag photos in there. So there's just it's, there's a learning curve to e-commerce, there's a learning curve, maybe to new platforms, but then sometimes just depending on the clientele, we're also just teaching them some things on how to use a computer. So we're proud of the fact that we've had many vendors and businesses who have never sold online before, they can now manage their online stores. They can now get sales, they know how to do their pieces, and just the learning curve for different businesses may take a little bit longer.

Steve Adams, host 08:51

"Get into the 21st century," is what you're saying [laughter]. You mentioned New York there, which is kind of interesting. I see that again, on your website that you have 10 locations listed. How are new locations added, and what would the process be to set one of those up, Cherie?

Cherie Edilson 09:11

So mostly they're inbound right now. We have a lot of different chambers or communities that are contacting us. And they know, they've realized now more than ever, that they need to do something to help their businesses and help themselves online. Because there's a handful of businesses in every community that are great, that you're not going to need that hand holding. But a lot of businesses, even if they have a website, it may not be e-commerce-enabled. So we're getting an influx of a lot of different communities that are trying to help their businesses.

Cherie Edilson 09:42

And then we have a base contract price that we start out at, that can support up to 400 members. And then depending on how many businesses they have in their membership or in their community, then we could just kind of scale our price from there. And we work with them just even to roll out the platform. So as soon as they kind of say, yeah, we're ready, they pay their initial deposit, we start building their individual site. And then we have a whole site partner resource guide of emails that they can send out to their businesses and let them know what's coming, and we have some fliers that they can show them here, this is what's coming and here's what you can do to prepare. It might even be, here's how to start taking pictures of your photos, here's what you should put in a product description—just some of those general things that they can do while we're building the site on our end.

Cherie Edilson 10:30

And once it's ready, we usually do like a live webinar with the members that are going to be selling on there right away. And then we have a bunch of how-to videos and things that we send out to businesses as they get ready. And then we review everything that comes in, so in the very beginning, all the products that get submitted, we see them. And some people are great right away, and we can approve and publish those products, and then some people will submit products with—they forgot their photo, or added no description or might have forgot a price. And so we can work with businesses to either submit those back to draft and help them there, or fix some things on our end.

Cherie Edilson 11:05

So it's really, what's nice about it for businesses, they're not having to do e-commerce alone. You have somebody looking over your shoulder, you have somebody giving you some best practices, or maybe even helping to fix your products before they're published out to the world. And so for the business, if you're a member of that chamber of commerce, and you fall within the membership that's paid for, they have a free shop to sell up to 25 products on there. So for most businesses, that's enough, and we don't take a commission on their orders. So it's really nice for small businesses, that... I mean, I sold on Amazon myself for a long time as a business owner. And there's not only the monthly fee that comes out from there, there was also the commission fees, so that could be up to 8% to 14% on some categories. There was pick and pack fees for sending to Prime, there were storage fees, there was just, you know, there's all these extra fees that come out.

Cherie Edilson 11:55

So we just really want to make it simple for businesses. If you're a member of the chamber of commerce, you get it for free. They've already paid for that 25 products for you. And if you're not, we usually have a non-member plan. If you can't join your chamber, then they can still start a subscription on the other side just for a monthly payment. But yeah, mostly right now it's inbound. And we're setting up communities as their boards approve. And we have about, at least three more that should be coming through here really soon. And a number of them that are still out for proposal through their boards right now that may be coming in, in the next month or so.

Steve Adams, host 12:28

Well, that was kind of the next question I was going to ask. You'd mentioned New York. Are there other new locations coming down the pipeline that you see, and who might those people be?

Cherie Edilson 12:37

So the one of the newest ones is probably going to be in eastern Iowa, four communities are coming together to start a site together. And then it may continue to grow even further after that, after these first four start on there, so other communities could piggyback on it. So it's with Maquoketa, Bellevue, DeWitt and Clinton, so four smaller towns that are coming together to make eastern Iowa site. We have another new one starting probably in New York soon, in upstate New York, Canandaigua, New York. We have an Alabama site that I think is going to be closing probably here today as well. So that'll be our first one down in Alabama. And then a number of other ones that I think should close here soon. But I'll wait til they're a little bit further long before I announce those.

Steve Adams, host 13:21

Good enough, good enough. Well, sounds like you're becoming national here, at the very least. So do you have specific markets you target, or is it by request that somebody would ask you?

Cherie Edilson 13:33

It's really mostly by request. So we're still kind of a small team, and it's mostly responding to inbound right now. So I mean, I imagine as we continue to grow, we'll have outbound sales, but for the most part, it's mostly just inbound people that we've either, in communities we've already worked with, so that's how New York is starting to grow. We have probably at least five more New York sites that could, you know, turn out here soon. And it's just because we started that one in St. Lawrence County, New York. And there was a press release that went out around that one. And I had, I think, five inquiries just from New York alone that came in that day from that press release. So I think once a community is doing it near you, and you're seeing it work for them, that's when a lot of inbound sales are coming in. So that's really where we're just responding to, is just those who have already contacted us.

Steve Adams, host 14:23

Yeah, let's say I'm a business in Iowa, do I need to have a physical location to be on one of your sites or can I be an at-home type crafter as you were mentioning earlier?

Cherie Edilson 14:35

Yep. So we have several at home businesses, so it kind of runs the gamut. We have bakers that do sell baked goods on our website, we have crafters that make knitted or crocheted products. We have a weighted blanket vendor. We have people who do services from their home, so whether it's like video editing and websites services, and some of those are home-based businesses. We even have some of the, like, network marketing businesses on there as well. So those are also considered home-based. So we have, yeah, we have several home-based businesses.

Steve Adams, host 15:11

Personally, not only to assist those local economies, but also provide some solutions for Main Street businesses. Can you tell me of any examples on the website that surprised you and how the impact really came home for you?

Cherie Edilson 15:29

One of the stories that I usually tell is, we always kind of think of this an e-commerce environment, but we actually, that businesses can sell in this in a couple ways. We can do the e-commerce, businesses could also link back to their own website to check out. But then we also have this, we call it our send inquiry feature, where you can remove the Add to Cart button entirely and a customer can just send you an inquiry about your product. So maybe if a business isn't ready to sell online yet, or it's so

custom or it's a service, and we have ... Our very first site is in the small town, Urbana, Nebraska, they have about 1500 people in their entire town, and one of the businesses on there makes custom metal works. And he ... at our last count, he had received inquiries from 36 different states for his custom metal work signs. And his signs, I mean, at the minimum, they're about \$500 to, you know, thousands of dollars, because they're just ... they're custom big metal works.

Cherie Edilson 16:26

So he got a request for a 76-foot metal sign for a cemetery in New Hampshire. And he's from a small town in Urbana, Nebraska. And I just think that shows the power of not only the internet, but also if you have a good product that people want, then they'll order it from wherever, you know. Like I think a lot of times, brick and mortar businesses, when they get into their shops, they think of their customers as just those that can come into their store and they can talk with and they maybe know their kids and they love that one-to-one, face-to-face contact. But their customers could also be somebody who lives in an entirely different state and could equally love them just as much. And they could equally share to their friends about how great they are.

Cherie Edilson 17:09

And I think online, it helps to transform who you thought your traditional customer was, and really opens up, you know, to the the whole, you know, the whole world can see it. Ours is just the United States, but it opens your customer base up to the whole entire United States, which I think is pretty amazing. And then even right now, it's kind of going full circle with the farmers markets and the changes that have happened to that through Governor Reynolds's proclamations for COVID-19. We're actually helping the Cedar Rapids Farmers Market, which is one of the largest open air markets, come to sell online through our Cedar Rapids site. And so it's ... a lot of these vendors, in the very beginning when we were just starting out and we were looking for people to start on our marketplace, and we'd call up and say hey, like, we want to help you sell online, and they weren't ready to. You know, who was I, I was just Sherry and her husband trying to start a marketplace, they didn't really even know us. And then now, we're helping them all get online right now, because that's the only way that some of them are able to sell through the farmers market is through our platform. So I just think it's, that was also really rewarding, that three years later now, it's come full circle.

Steve Adams, host 18:17

Especially under difficult circumstances. Any final thoughts from you, Cherie, on anything else you think our listeners ought to know here?

Cherie Edilson 18:26

I think if you're not already selling online in some regard, it's not as overwhelming as it may seem. And so we're here to help. I think that's one of the compliments that we've got back from some of our businesses lately, especially that are joining us, they've realized like, this is, I can do this. I think that's the piece that they really like—I can do this. I think it seemed very overwhelming. So we're here to help and we're in for chambers or other, you know, community providers that are out there too. We're here to help you remember so that you guys don't have to do it alone. And businesses don't have to do it alone, we're here to help.

Steve Adams, host 19:01

Well, I think the fact that you walked that 79 year old through the steps and processes and helped them out, and again, you said you review everything and if there's something doesn't seem quite right or the picture's not of the quality you want, or the description of the product is not what you want, you can always help them through that process to improve and make that make that online presence a little bit better for them, right?

Cherie Edilson 19:22

Correct.

Steve Adams, host 19:24

Cherie, all I can say to you right now is, thanks for joining us today and providing your insight. So if someone is interested in contacting you for any additional questions, how might they reach you?

Cherie Edilson 19:36

The easiest way probably is just go to shopwhereilive.com and there's a contact form right there on the front page and submit it through there and we'll get in touch with you. My name is Cherie. So it's also cherie@shopwhereilive.com is my email, and I'm happy to answer any questions that way as well.S

Steve Adams, host 19:56

Shopwhereilive.com, folks, shopwhereilive.com. If you have any questions about this Back to Business Iowa podcast, please feel free to contact me, Steve Adams, at stadams@iastate.edu. And thanks again for listening. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State Extension and Outreach and the Small Business Development Centers of Iowa. Always Serving Iowans, #StrongIowa. Let's get back to work, Iowa. Our justice statement: This institution is an equal opportunity provider. For the full non discrimination statement or accommodation inquiries, please go to www.extension.iastate.edu/diversity/ext. Again, thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.

[music]